

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS AT  
THE ELLIOT HOUSE  
323 SOUTH FAIRFAX STREET  
(SITE 44AX192)**

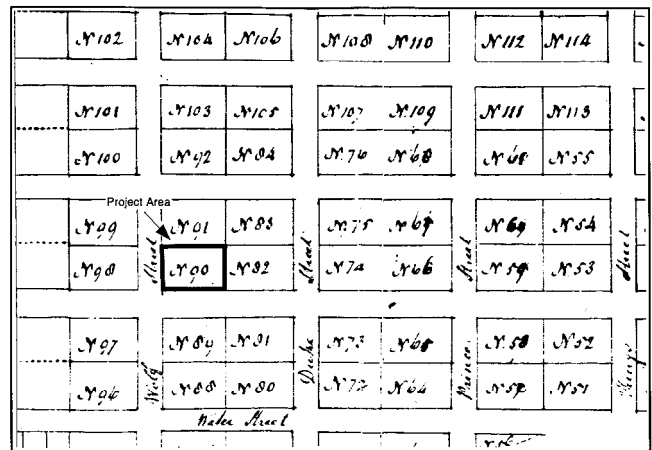
***Introduction***

The Elliot House, located at 323 South Fairfax Street in the City of Alexandria, is a two-story Greek Revival home that, until recently, had changed little since its construction in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The property is now owned by the Old Presbyterian Meeting House of Alexandria, who in 2003 planned for the construction of a large, partly subterranean addition to the rear of the historic structure. Because of the historical nature of the property and its location within Old Town, the City of Alexandria required that archaeological investigations be conducted on the property prior to breaking ground for construction. From April through June of 2003, professional archaeologists conducted investigations on the property in order to determine whether or not significant archaeological resources would be affected by the planned construction. These investigations resulted in the discovery of two brick features, one well and one cistern, located in the rear yard of the house. Both features were excavated completely before they were subsequently destroyed by the construction of the new addition.

***Historical Background***

The Elliot House is located on a portion of the original Lot 90, which occupied the southeast quadrant of the city block bounded by Wolfe Street on the south, Royal Street on the west, Duke Street to the north, and South Fairfax Street to the east. Lot 90 was one of the lots laid out for the Town of Alexandria in 1763

as part of the first enlargement of the town authorized by an Act of the Virginia Assembly in November of 1762. George Johnston, one of the Trustees of Alexandria, purchased Lots 90 and the adjacent Lot 91 for



**Portion of West's 1763 Map of Alexandria, Showing  
the Location of the Project Area**

15 pounds at a meeting of the Trustees held on May 9, 1763. In his will written in February of 1766, Johnston requested that his town lots be sold by his executors for the payment of his debts.

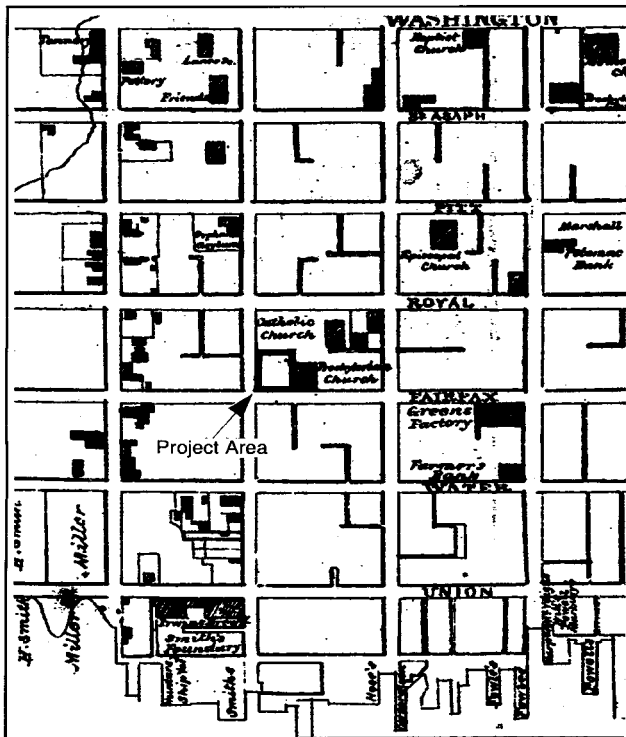
Richard Arell and his family moved to Alexandria in the late 1760s, at which time he began buying town lots in Alexandria as investments. No record can be found of when he purchased Lots 90 and 91, but the transaction must have taken place before 1773, at which time Arell conveyed portions of these lots for the site of the Presbyterian

The 1850 census enumerates the Unruh household as consisting of Charles B. (age 42), his wife Susan (age 36), and their five children, Charles (age 16), Laura (age 10), Georgiana (age 10), Marie H. (age 6), and Frank (age 2). A presumably unrelated young man, John Johnson (age 21), was also in residence at the household. Charles B., his oldest son, Charles, and Johnson are all listed as blacksmiths. It is likely that Johnson

Unruh put his house up for sale in 1855. The following advertisement appears in the *Alexandria Gazette* on June 19, 1855:

There were a number of owners of the Elliot House after 1855, most of whom owned it for no longer than one or two decades. During this time, extensions were added and removed from the rear of the house, but much of the original house remained intact. In 1960 the property was sold to Jean R. Elliot, the last private owner of the property. In 1979 Elliot conveyed the lot and house to the Old Presbyterian Meeting House, with the reservation that she and her husband may remain in residence as long they lived.

From April through June of 2003 archaeological investigations were undertaken in the rear yard of the Elliot House lot. In the initial phase of these investigations, the additions on the rear of the house and the bricks paving the alley running east-west immediately north of the house were removed. Using a backhoe, the upper levels



### Portion of a Circa 1850 Plan of Alexandria, Showing the Location of the Project Area

of soil were stripped from the areas north and west of the house. A total of 25 features were identified and documented. In addition to a number of smaller features, two large brick shaft features were found; one was a well (designated Well 1), and the other was a cistern (designated Well 2). Several shovel test pits were also excavated in the yard in order to examine the soils for disturbance and to recover a sample of artifacts. These tests showed that layers of fill containing 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century artifacts covered all or most of the yard area.

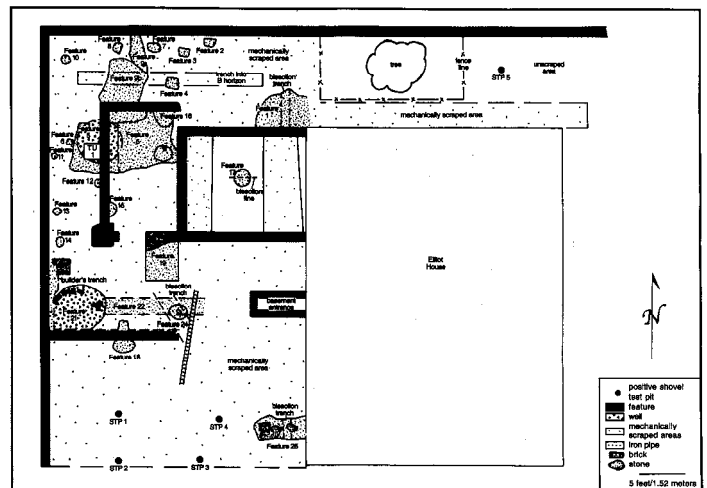
The large shaft features were excavated in the second phase of these investigations. Because of its depth, Well 1 required shoring, and the fill within the well was removed by the construction contractor. The archaeological staff supervised the excavations and water screened all of the fill. The fill in both features was removed in one foot levels, and artifacts from each level were bagged accordingly.

### ***Results of the Investigations***

Well 1 measured over 5 feet across and was just over 18 feet deep. The cistern was just under 5 feet in diameter and only 6 feet deep. Both were lined with dry-laid bricks placed in irregular courses. The bottom of the well was set on wooden planks, perhaps in order to stabilize the lower brick courses, which were laid in the soft mud at the water table. A terra cotta drain pipe that apparently led from the house emptied into the well at about 5 feet below the ground surface. This was probably a later modification added when the well was no longer used as a source for drinking water. The bottom of the cistern lay directly on the sandy subsoil.

An examination of the two shaft features themselves, the artifacts they contained, and the historic records associated with Elliot House suggests that the well and cistern were

probably constructed at the time when Charles Unruh built his house. Unruh had received a permit to connect to water company pipes in 1854, thereby eliminating the need for either a cistern or a well and making it unlikely that either would have been constructed after that time. It is also possible that one or both of these features was already on the lot when Unruh purchased it. The land tax records for the property show that prior to the construction of the house, the lot had been used as a garden. The well and/or the cistern may have serviced that garden.



**Plan Map Showing Features 1 - 25 within the Site Area**

The artifacts contained within the features tell us about when the well and cistern were no longer in use. The cistern was evidently abandoned long before the well. The most recent date of manufacture of the artifacts contained within the cistern fill was 1848, indicating that the feature was filled after that year. The stable that is mentioned in the 1855 advertisement for the sale of the property was located over the cistern, so it is likely that the feature was no longer in use when that structure was built. The artifacts and the records, therefore, indicate that the cistern was abandoned and filled sometime between 1848 and 1855.



*Transfer Printed Whiteware Plate from Cistern*

The artifacts in the cistern include household items such as food refuse, ceramics, bottle glass, glass tableware, chimney lamp glass, personal items, buttons, toys, as well as nails and windowpane glass. The artifacts are most likely refuse from the Unruh household. The artifacts in general appear to reflect a household of relative, but not extreme, wealth. Of the white earthenware and porcelain ceramics, a greater number were decorated than plain, indicating consumer choice of the more expensive of the available wares of the day. The assemblage also included a large number of glass tumbler and tableware fragments. The large quantity of tumbler fragments is surprising for an ordinary household and suggests they may have served a special function. Large quantities of tumblers are usually associated with a tavern public house, or boarding house; however, the historic records provide no evidence that the property was used as such. The glass tableware fragments included bowls, jugs or pitchers, plates, wine glasses, goblets, one vase, and a cup.

The cistern also contained a variety of miscellaneous items. Objects that might have been associated with the Unruh children include one bone die, one porcelain doll leg, several slate pencil fragments, and marbles

made of stone, porcelain, and clay. Clothing related items include a few glass beads, bone buttons and buttons made of white milk glass, as well as a single metal shoe eyelet. Small personal items include an eye glass lens, a bone bobbin cap, a metal pocket knife with a tortoise shell handle, clay pipe fragments, and two bone toothbrush heads. The food remains included bone fragments, egg shells, fish scales, and coffee beans.



*Bone Toothbrush Heads, Buttons, and Die from Cistern*

The well, on the other hand, was not abandoned and filled until after 1910, which is the most recent manufacture date for artifacts contained within the majority of its fill. Because only the upper levels of the well contained fragments of duraglas, which became widely available after 1940, the well was probably almost completely filled before that year. The owners of the property during this time period between 1910 and include the George B. Kennedy family (from 1893 until 1918), the Chamber of Commerce (from 1918 until 1923), the Reese C. Bowton family (from 1923 until 1928), and the Paul C. Crocker household (1928 until 1936).

The household refuse consisted primarily of glass bottle fragments, a great many of which were beer or ale bottles (almost 20% of the total bottle fragments). Also in the refuse were ceramic sherds, miscellaneous personal

items, such as comb fragments, a hair pin, a barrette, bone fan slats, a purse clasp, and bone and plastic toothbrush fragments. Clothing-related items included garter, snap, and safety pin fragments, pieces of leather shoes and boots, and a shell button. Several toys were also found in this feature, including porcelain doll fragments, a hand painted doll face, one toy porcelain plate, and several clay marbles. Other items included a thermometer fragment, wooden and slate pencils, a mechanical pencil, drawer pulls, electrical lighting fixture parts, and miscellaneous metal hardware. The glass bottle fragments included a variety of container types, reflecting the growing availability of glass containers and the diversification of its use as containers for a expanding variety of products. Very few (only four) glass tableware fragments were included in the assemblage. In addition to household refuse, this feature also contained large quantities of oyster shells and voluminous quantities of furnace or stove waste that included coal, ash, and slag.



*Hand Painted Porcelain Doll from Well*

The household items found in both features are secondary refuse deposits and may not be accurate and complete representations of the total material culture universe of either household. Nevertheless, the presence of certain items such as toys, beads, fan slats,

liquor and ale bottles, and pipe fragments give us a tangible reminder of the lives of the men, women, and children who likely lived in the Elliot House during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and again during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



*Miscellaneous Bottles from Well*

**This summary is based upon a 2004 report entitled, *Phase I Archeological Investigation at 323 South Fairfax Street, Alexandria, Virginia*, with contributing authors Christine Jirikowic, Gwen J Hurst and Tammy Bryant. Produced by Thunderbird Archaeological Associates on behalf of Alexandria Archaeology and Scott-Long Construction.**